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Nuclear freeze and other unhelpful ideas

By Robert R. Bowie

Washington

The debate on the nuclear issues is intensifying. The administration doubtless sparked it by the comments and leaks implying that nuclear war was "thinkable," and its initial delay on arms control. But the ferment here and abroad has reflected deep-seated concerns about the role of nuclear weapons in defense strategy and the lack of progress in arms control.

Unfortunately much of the debate has been less enlightening than the subject deserves. Too often it has mainly expressed a sense of frustration and a yearning for simple answers to complex problems. Many of the initiatives have been responding to these feelings more than charting a practical course.

The nuclear freeze is an example. Besides extensive backing in Congress, this proposal will be on the ballot in many states and localities. It calls for the US and USSR to "immediately agree to a mutual, verifiable halt of all further testing, production and deployment of nuclear warheads, missiles and delivery systems" as a first step to reductions. This is not a useful step. Such a sweeping moratorium would require a long negotiation just to spell it out and could be verified only partially. It could decrease Soviet motives for more serious measures, solidify the theater nuclear imbalance in Europe, and impede shifts toward more stable weapons systems.

Or take the suggestion that NATO declare that it will not be the first to use nuclear weapons. The purpose – avoiding the use of nuclear weapons – is commendable, but the proposal is badly flawed. If taken seriously, it would make conventional defense harder by removing the inhibitions on the massing of Soviet attack forces, and could enhance the risks of war in Europe by making the Soviet Union (and US) sanctuaries. That is why this course does not appeal to Europeans and will not induce them to develop more conventional defense.

And neither will the threat to cut US forces in Europe as is being proposed by some in Congress, including the Senate Appropriations Committee. The grounds are frustration over European hesitation about theater nuclear weapons, and the supposed failure of European allies to carry their fair share of NATO defense. Actually during the 1970s, most of the European allies increased defense spending by an average of three percent annually. Between 1969 and 1980, the European share of total Western defense costs grew from 21 to 42 percent, while that of the US dropped to 56 percent. Any such force cut would not serve the US interest in European security and would only impede any effort to expand NATO conventional capabilities.

Frustration is a poor guide to policy. Simplistic solutions only arouse false hopes, leading to disillusion.

We should be devoting our energy to devising and pressing for more realistic steps to reducing the danger of nuclear catastrophe.

NATO strategy and forces should be developed to strengthen the capability for conventional defense and raise the nuclear threshold, but within the framework of a comprehensive deterrent. That is the only basis which will enlist European support and offer the best hope of preventing not just the use of nuclear weapons but of any resort to war.

And it appears feasible; newer types of conventional weapons, which are more accurate and more lethal, and better capacity to collect and analyze intelligence and target data offer the means for disrupting a Soviet conventional attack without resort to tactical nuclear weapons. And Gen. Bernard Rogers estimates that the cost would be only about 1 percent more per year than the present commitments of the NATO allies.

Admittedly, the recession is putting defense budgets in Europe under pressure, but the US should seek to get NATO to adopt this goal for the 1980s. To do so, it will have to convince the allies that the purpose is to reinforce the total deterrent and not to weaken the US commitment.

In arms control, it is essential to clarify priorities. Reducing nuclear arsenals is highly desirable, of course, but even radical cuts would still leave both sides with the means for mutual suicide. The primary aim in strategic arms control and in defense strategy should be to increase stability, especially in a crisis, and reduce the risks of war by miscalculation, by reducing vulnerability to preemption or a first strike. That would entail reshaping the nuclear arsenals on both sides. Agreements should be designed to create pressures to move to secure second-strike capabilities which will enhance deterrent stability. Similarly, the MBFR talks on conventional forces in Europe could be used to put in place stabilizing measures such as by providing earlier warning.

The Reagan administration could contribute to the nuclear debate and increase confidence in its defense strategy and its arms control commitment by defining more clearly its aims in both fields.

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Friday, October 29, 1982 THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR